

New light on the Tudors

Black Britons were much more common in the 16th century than previously thought, this fascinating study reveals

HISTORY

Dan Jones

Black Tudors The Untold Story by *Miranda Kaufmann* Oneworld £18.99 pp376

One December day at White Cross Manor in Gloucestershire, the lord of the estate oversaw a flogging. The year was 1596 and although Christmas was approaching, Sir Edward Wynter had his blood up. One of his servants, John Guye, had been causing him trouble for months: neglecting his work, distracting other employees, absconding to Ireland for a summer with no warning, marrying without permission and stirring up (in Wynter's view) a feud between himself and another local family.

Now Wynter figured he was due a reckoning. Before a public gathering at the manor he upbraided Guye, accusing him of being a feckless servant and a wasteful employee who had caused him serious financial loss. "Therefore you

have deserved correction at my hands," Wynter thundered. "You shall have punishment for your great abuse!" He ordered his porter, Edward Swarthy, to step forward and dole out a whipping.

The porter belted Guye four or five times on his back, his legs and elsewhere. Wynter piled in with a blow to

the head from his riding crop, and then Guye was sent packing: bruised, humiliated and out of a job. It was a savaging, and it landed Wynter in court for his brutality. But this was not the only notable detail in the case. Most interesting today – although, fascinatingly, less so at the time – is the fact that the porter who delivered the whipping was black.

In the popular imagination Tudor England is, to borrow Greg Dyke's famous description of the BBC, hideously white. Of ginger beards, milky breasts, high hairlines and ruffs there are plenty. But most of us would be hard-pressed to name a single person of colour who

has any prominence in the most pored-over period in English history, other than Othello: Shakespeare's fictional Moor of Venice.

Yet as Miranda Kaufmann's *Black Tudors* shows, Swarthy was far from the only black person who turned up in England during the Tudor age. She has unearthed hundreds of references to people of African origin, and her splendid book, which is arranged around the biographies of 10 of them, is an excellent study of this hitherto silent minority. It is also that rare thing – a work of history about the Tudors that actually says something fresh and new.

This is Kaufmann's first book and it comes at a good time. There is a mini-vogue

for studies of this sort, with notable recent contributions from Catherine Fletcher, who has published a biography of Alessandro de' Medici, the "black prince" of Florence, and Jerry Brotton, whose *This Orient Isle* examined Elizabethan links with the Islamic world.

Kaufmann is, therefore, in smart company, and hers is a cracking contribution to the field. She holds an academic post at London University's Institute for Commonwealth Studies – and her work bears all the marks of meticulous research through archives either unexamined or else combed for the usual Tudor fluff. Yet she wears her learning lightly.

One of the most fascinating cases she presents is that of the only black Tudor whose image has survived. John Blanke was a trumpeter at the courts of Henry VII and Henry VIII, having perhaps arrived in the entourage of Catherine of Aragon, the Spanish princess who became the younger Henry's first wife. Blanke's surname was most likely what passed for a Tudor joke: the only black man in the band being given a French soubriquet meaning "white".

In a document depicting his performance at a tournament given in February 1511 to celebrate the birth of Henry's short-lived first baby boy, Blanke appears on horseback, lavishly outfitted

in a billowing uniform of yellow and grey, a trumpet hung with the Tudor royal arms at his lips and a green and gold turban around his head. This was not the only great state occasion at which he played: when Henry had been crowned two years previously Blanke had also blown his horn, on that occasion in an even finer livery of red, a colour reserved for only the highest-status officials.

Plainly, Blanke was unusual, but he was hardly shunned for the colour of his skin. Henry's court viewed the people they called "negroes" and "blackamoors" as exotic

rather than hateful. The modern reader might cringe on reading Kaufmann's account of a young Henry and his friend, the Earl of Essex, cavorting around the palace in blackface as part of a Turkish-themed fancy-dress parade. But as this book argues consistently, for most of the Tudor period England was one of the less terrible parts of Europe in which a black person might find themselves.

This was not necessarily a matter of moral enlightenment, but of economics. Although the Tudors did trade slaves, England in the 16th century lagged far behind Spain and Portugal in the acquisition of a New World empire which demanded forced labour satisfied by the abduction and transportation of West

Africans. Even in the early days of England's Virginia colonies, Kaufmann has found evidence of free black people – although as American history tells us, this was a short-lived thing.

Of course, not every story is as happy as Blanke's or as convention-busting as Swarthy's. Extending her range into the early 17th century, Kaufmann traces the story of Anne Cobbe, "the Tawny Moor with Soft Skin", who worked as a prostitute in Westminster in the 1620s. Cobbe's appearance in the record is fleeting, but Kaufmann's reconstruction of life on the game in Jacobean London hardly makes for happy reading.

Nor does her description of a black woman whom Francis Drake took aboard the Golden Hinde during his expedition to sail around the globe in the late 1570s. Maria, described as the ship's "proper negro

wench", was captured from pirates and soon showed herself pregnant, probably by one of the Hinde's 60-strong crew or perhaps Drake himself. Whoever was the father, a ship was no place for a baby, and late in 1579 Drake stopped at a small island in Indonesia, dumped his heavily pregnant "wench" and sailed away.

Tudor England might have been a shade less hideous than we have previously assumed, but at the end of the day, black lives did not particularly matter. ■

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African groom can be seen in this 1617 portrait of Anne of Denmark. Right, Annibale Carracci's portrait of an African woman, c1583-85

Evidence in art An